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SUBJECT: READING, WRITING, AND QUR'ANIC RECITATION: THE ISLAMIST INFLUENCE IN KUWAIT'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, PART I

REF: A. KUWAIT 1660

[B](#). KUWAIT 1306

[C](#). KUWAIT 656

[D](#). KUWAIT 264

[E](#). 03 KUWAIT 482

Classified By: CDA Matthew H. Tueller for reasons 1.4 (d).

This is part I of a two-part message.

[1](#)1. (U) Summary and Introduction: The January shoot-outs between Kuwaiti security officers and extremist militants placed new emphasis on the debate over the Islamic religious education curriculum in public schools, an already politically divisive issue at the best of times. As Kuwaitis wrestle with the reality of homegrown extremists, liberals and other critics of the current system contend that students must endure a heavy course load of religious indoctrination in conservative religious ideologies throughout their school years, which leads to intolerance and hatred of non-Sunni Muslims. Islamists view the current curriculum as appropriate and necessary for all students. While the GOK is making efforts to upgrade and reform the entire curricula, including religious education, Islamists, particularly graduates from the ultra-conservative Shari'a College who make up almost half of the religious education teachers, are seeking to mandate Islamic religious education classes in private schools -- a requirement from which private schools have historically been exempt.

[1](#)2. (U) Kuwaiti Islamists have played a significant role in the historical development of the public school curriculum, most notably the religious education components. Because of their influential role, which by most accounts continues today, Islamists have had a strong hand in directing the content of religious education in Kuwait. While the decades-long involvement of the Muslim Brotherhood is understood, Salafis and other conservatives are joining the call to maintain or increase current levels of religious education in schools. PolOff met separately with several academics including two former ministers, two former senior officials in charge of educational curriculum at the Education Ministry, the current Dean of the College of Social Sciences at Kuwait University, and a current member of the Faculty of Shari'a and Islamic Studies to discuss the state of Kuwait's educational curriculum and the Islamist influence on the system. Their willingness to offer candid critiques of the role of religion in the public education system is typical of the openness of debate in Kuwaiti, but conservative religious views have strong roots in the society and attempts by reformers to institute dramatic changes will quickly run up against the strength of religious feelings and identity. This overview of the Islamist influence in Kuwaiti education continues Post's examination of the role and influence of the Islamist movement in Kuwaiti society. End Summary and Introduction.

#### The Curriculum and the Controversy

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[1](#)3. (U) The official religion of Kuwait is Islam and as a result, all Kuwaiti public school children from elementary through high school are required to take Islamic religious education classes. Religious classes are held four times a week in primary school and three times a week for all older students. The courses, which critics claim propagate a conservative brand of intolerant Islam to Kuwait's youth, consist of lessons on the Holy Qur'an, general Islamic studies and, more recently, Qur'an memorization.

[1](#)4. (U) Since the involvement of several Kuwaiti extremist militants in the January 2005 shoot-outs, many in society have publicly called into question the role and influence of religious education in Kuwait. Many critics claim that public schools indoctrinate Kuwaiti children in an intolerant form of Islam. For years, Kuwaiti liberals have called for the reform of the system, accusing the GOK of permitting intolerant forms of Islam to be taught in public schools. They claim that socially conservative religious interpretations and militant definitions of jihad must be removed from schools and that more emphasis should be given to math and science. Most Islamists believe, however, that students are taught the right amount of religious education

and that it makes them better citizens and Muslims.

15. (SBU) Former Education Minister Dr. Ahmed Al-Rubei told PolOff that the religious programs in public schools do promote religious intolerance and that the curriculum must be reformed. He said another problem often overlooked was that students do not spend enough time in school. Kuwait's public schools are in session for 132 days each year and students attend classes five days a week from 7:30 AM - 13:00 PM, one of the shortest school years, he explained, of any nation with a modern, developed school system. Al-Rubei pointed to the volume and ideology of religious education and the brief school year as the largest problems facing any educational reform.

16. (SBU) Mubarak Al-Adwani, a liberal and a former Undersecretary of Information, told PolOff that the problem was not just the content of what was being taught in the schools, but also the "size of the dose." He explained that religion was invading many aspects of public education. Al-Adwani said that the Kuwaiti schools, since his youth, have replaced courses on world history with courses on "Islamic" history. The same happened with geography, he said, which became geography of the Islamic world. He pointed out that despite the presence of millions of Muslims in America, the U.S. is not included in geography classes. He added that even Arabic language classes, which used to teach famous poetry, now only focus on religious passages or lessons in morality. Al-Adwani said no matter where you turn in public schools you are bombarded with religion and much of what is taught is inaccurate.

17. (SBU) Dr. Mansour Gholoum, former Assistant Undersecretary for Planning at the Education Ministry and now the director of a progressive computer-based "e-learning" private school, said that religious propaganda was found throughout the public schools. He said that in public school classrooms, there are so many billboards and posters highlighting the Qur'an that they resemble an "Islamic Hong Kong." He also said that while in charge of curriculum at the Education Ministry, there was a move, which he resisted, to add even more Qur'anic verses to schoolrooms and textbooks, including math books.

18. (SBU) Former Information Minister and Professor of Linguistics at Kuwait University Dr. Saad bin Tefleh Al-Ajmi said that every public school now has a mosque attached to it, contrary to the system decades ago when schools, had, at most, a room used for prayer. He said that some teachers even "terrorize" other teachers to get them to pray at the mosque during prayer times. He complained that the school system was producing only untrained bureaucrats who know their Qur'an and who are more accepting of intolerant interpretations of Islam.

#### Critics Claim System Teaches Intolerance and Fear

19. (SBU) Dr. Humoud Al-Hattab, a retired 24-year employee of the Education Ministry and former member of the Muslim Brotherhood who served as General Supervisor for Islamic Education in the early 1990s, told PolOff that from the very start of a child's primary education, religious textbooks were too large and too complicated. He said much of the material in primary school books dealt with concepts such as hell and punishment, locking children into a "fearful mentality." He said another problem was that at a young age, children did not question their teachers, a significant problem when the topics being taught were complex religious issues that required discussion and reflection. He added that many of the ideas taught in schools "choke the children."

110. (SBU) Gholoum said the current public school curriculum teach too much religion, especially from an Islamist perspective. He told PolOff the story of a Shi'a woman who begged him to the point of tears to accept her son into his private school because she wanted him out of the public school system immediately. She told Gholoum that the religious education teacher taught the students in her son's class that all Shi'a were kafir (unbelievers) and that the Qur'an said to kill them all. She was greatly distraught, he explained, that government schools were teaching her son that his family should be killed.

111. (SBU) Conversely, Dr. Bassam Al-Shatti, editor-in-chief of the Salafi weekly magazine "Al-Furqan" and professor at the ultra-conservative Shari'a College, insisted the religious material being taught in schools was age appropriate and that heavier theological topics such as hell and torture were not taught to young children, but were only addressed in the upper grades. He said there were already music and art lessons every week for students and that those classes were not in jeopardy of being removed. (Note: Kuwait University Political Science Professor and columnist Dr. Ahmed Al-Baghdadi was convicted of insulting Islam because of language in a column in which he called for more music classes and less religious education (ref b). End

Note.) He said that contrary to charges that the amount of religious education was increasing, the only change in recent years to the religious education program was the addition of a Qur'an memorization course. He compared the proposed curricula changes to the anti-terror campaign, stating that both "compromise the fundamentals of Islam," and expressed concern that the teaching of religious "fundamentals may be revoked by fearful members of the National Assembly." Using the issue of jihad as an example, he said that it was a tenet of Islam and should not be excluded from the educational system.

12. (SBU) Regarding religious education instructors, Al-Hattab said that approximately 40 percent were graduates of the Shari'a College while the rest were mostly general education studies graduates. He complained that the Shari'a graduates were too conservative in their religious beliefs and did not know enough about teaching to do it well, and that the general education graduates did not know enough about religion to teach it to others. He lamented that the religion teachers instructed the students in their own individual styles and had no oversight. He added that some students received a Muslim Brotherhood interpretation in their classes, others a Salafi perspective, and still others, although probably few, a Shi'a viewpoint.

#### A Peek Inside The Textbooks

13. (SBU) Al-Hattab told PolOff the religious education books are substandard. He explained that, in his opinion, they dealt with matters of secondary importance in Islam and presented the lessons in harsh and complex ways. He also said that the authors of the books generally were not trained or highly educated in religious scholarship. The authors of some, according to Al-Hattab, were Kuwait University instructors, activists from the Awqaf Ministry, and school principals. Al-Rubei separately told PolOff that some of the books used in public school religious education were acquired by the curriculum board at the Ministry through Muslim Brotherhood organizations in Egypt.

14. (SBU) Shi'a MP Dr. Yousef Al-Zalzala conducted a detailed study of the public school educational curricula focusing primarily on anti-Shi'a material used in grades eight through twelve. The examples cited in his study were from books used in Kuwaiti classrooms during the 2004-2005 school year. Al-Zalzala was outraged at what he discovered, and has since been a constant voice in support of efforts to change the curricula. He said publicly that the victims of the January 2005 shoot-outs with militants were also victims of extremist teachings promoted by the Kuwaiti educational system. He argued that his study revealed that "part of the curriculum is false" and that some parts "openly contradict the (Kuwaiti) constitution and Islamic teachings."

15. (SBU) In his 80-page report, Al-Zalzala asserted that some of the Kuwaiti textbooks were written by Wahhabi-style conservative Sunnis and taught an extremist ideology. One text Al-Zalzala's study examined taught that many commit the mortal sin of shirk (associating other beings with God) when they follow "non-Islamic practices" such as wearing amulets, fearing the dead and the djinn (demons), and visiting graveyards and shrines, acts that some Muslims, particularly some Shi'a perform. It continued, claiming that some forms of shirk are "punishable by death and eternal hell." Al-Zalzala commented in his report that other texts accused some Muslims, especially Shi'a, of being polytheists deserving death. He said these teachings incite young children to "hate and reject others."

16. (U) Other lessons, his report explained, specifically praised Wahhabi Islam labeling it as one of the movements that call Muslims back to pure Islamic practices. One section in a Kuwaiti high school text pointed to the Salafi Revival of the Islamic Heritage Society and the Muslim Brotherhood's Social Reform Society as examples of effective charitable organizations throughout the world, with specific mention of their activities in Africa. (Note: Charitable branches in Asia of both organizations are known to have ties to terror funding. End Note.)

17. (U) According to the report, the textbooks teach that it is "sinful to eat any food that has been sacrificed in a name other than God." Al-Zalzala reported that the way the information is presented implies that it is forbidden to share food or meals with non-Muslims. Another lesson teaches that it is sinful to shake hands or touch a woman who is not related, and that mixing between men and women is haram (forbidden). Additionally, some textbooks repeat that women cannot travel alone and must wear a veil.

18. (U) Speaking on the hegemony of foreign cultures, one eighth-grade religious education textbook stated "because Muslims abandoned God's book and Sunna which teach building and developing, the enemy invaded us after it had prepared itself very well both scientifically and militarily and was

able to take possession of our land and our wealth. The enemy then paved the way for its culture and morals, which are contrary to God's law, by oppressing Islamic culture and establishing foreign schools and universities in our countries." It continued, saying that "many Muslim countries gave in to Western culture at the expense of their own culture, ignoring the fact that cultural colonization is more dangerous than the colonization of the land."

19. (U) Additional controversial excerpts found in Al-Zalzala's study include:

- "Men are the providers for women for her own interest and that of the children. Had the woman been the provider she would have unwittingly harmed herself and her children."

- "The mixing of the sexes is something rejected by healthy instincts and wise minds because the veil protects the woman."

- Freedom of opinion is "guaranteed by Islam as long as it doesn't contradict the Qur'an or the Sunna."

20. (U) A June 8 edition of the liberal news weekly Al-Talee'a published additional excerpts from a tenth-grade Islamic education book used during the 2004-2005 school year. The newspaper added its critique of the religious instruction by challenging the merits of the lessons.

- "To protect her honor, the woman must wear the legislated hijab to cover her provocative nature from strangers and not expose herself as was done in the first ignorance." (Note: The "first ignorance" is a reference to the jahiliya (the pre-Islamic period). End Note.) The news weekly suggests that linking hijab-wearing to a woman's honor will encourage students to question their mother's honor if she is not veiled.

- "Mixing of the sexes is forbidden." Al-Talee'a asks how students should interpret this when many of them start careers in institutions in which men and women work together.

- The textbook outlines the procedures for addressing someone if they leave the Islamic religion. "First, religious scholars must talk to this person and see if the person will repent. If the person does not repent, the Muslim ruler sentences him to 'rida' or capital punishment for apostasy." The article's author asks rhetorically "please tell me who says such a thing in our day and age, or is it so popular in our society that we must engage in excommunication and murder?"

End of Part I.

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